



Mandating Truly “Highly Qualified” Teachers for the Future of Education

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The requirement that *all* children be taught by “highly qualified teachers” is the linchpin of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). It is the key element designed to transform all students into effective learners and get 100 percent of America’s children proficient in rigorous state standards by 2014. But in practice, this requirement is a cruel delusion. A lot of effort has gone into No Child Left Behind—a lot of enforcement, a lot of states being put on the carpet for not having all their teachers highly qualified. But when you get down to the nitty-gritty, what No Child Left Behind actually enforces as high qualifications is simply the same minimum-competency teacher qualification standards we have been talking about for more than twenty years.

No Child Left Behind equates “highly qualified” with teacher certification tests, and an overwhelming number of teacher certification tests are based on a concept of minimum competence. “Minimum competence” is simply not the level of teacher knowledge and teacher performance that is likely to motivate and instruct all students in a state—encompassing diverse populations with many different needs—in the knowledge content required by that state’s standards. If we are really serious about getting highly qualified teachers in the classroom—and most of the research has made it clear that the key element in providing a meaningful opportunity to meet standards is the quality of teaching—we have got to shift gears. And if No Child Left Behind is to be taken seriously, we need to look very differently at both what makes a teacher highly qualified and how we can ensure that highly qualified teachers are in place in all of our classrooms.

One of the great ironies of No Child Left Behind is that no matter how much pressure is put on systems to improve the quality of their teaching, the basic inequities in the way resources are distributed in most areas means that the poor kids in the urban and rural areas—those most in need of highly qualified

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teachers—will be the ones who are least likely to benefit. As high-caliber teachers enter the system, the best tend to rise to the top—meaning they will move to the affluent, suburban districts that can pay their teachers more. Over time these districts entice the most talented teachers away from the inner-city and rural schools with higher pay and better working conditions. Getting—and keeping—highly qualified teachers where they are needed most is at the heart of what the No Child Left Behind exercise is really about. And if we cannot accomplish that, then this whole attempt into which the country has put so much time, effort, and money will have been for naught.

The Cost of a Sound Education

In more than two dozen states around the country, adequacy lawsuits are taking place—and plaintiffs are winning most of them. Why? A lot of it has to do with the seriousness with which courts, if not all educators, take the standards-based reform movement and the requirements of NCLB. But once a court says that children have a constitutional right to a thorough and efficient or a sound, basic education, what's the next step? How do we get them there if the state's not already providing them with it?

One of the tools that has been developed as a result of these lawsuits over the last couple of decades has been the costing-out study. Following the costing-out study done in conjunction with New York State's adequacy lawsuit a few years back, the courts ordered a yearly \$5.6 billion increase in New York City's education budget to provide all city students with a sound basic education. There are a number of methodologies used for estimating the number of dollars needed to provide this level of education to all students. The methodology that has been used more often than any other—and the primary one used in New York—is the professional judgment methodology. This entails assembling a group of people considered among the most qualified, most experienced educators in the state—including superintendents, principals, and teachers—and putting them through a series of simulated exercises designed to answer the following question: What resources do we need to meet the constitutional standard to give all students the opportunity to meet the challenging content that's in most of the new state standards?—or, more simply, What resources do we need to really get the job done? This is not the kind of question that usually goes through most educators' minds at budget time. Rather, the question most educators face is, Given the amount of money that we are realistically going to get from the legislature and the local taxpayers this year, what's the best we can do with it? Now that's a very different question, and that's the big difference in the results you get from these

costing-out studies as compared to the results you get in most budget situations. It is a rare opportunity for experienced professionals to stretch their imaginations rather than their allotted budget dollars.

Let’s take a moment and shift from asking that question in regard to money in the abstract to focus on the question before us, which is how do we get truly qualified teachers who can do the job that No Child Left Behind and most of our states’ standards put forward—that is, really instruct kids from very diverse backgrounds in a manner that will bring them up to the expectations of the state standards? As a little exercise in my office, I put together a panel of experienced people to review the literature and brainstorm, and we came up with a pretty comprehensive list of the range of things we’ve got to do in terms of training, testing, paying, and providing working conditions that would attract teachers who can meet the challenges of No Child Left Behind—or any other act. Some people might call such a wish list grandiose, full of things people talk about in the abstract, and that to put them into effect would merely be an aspiration. To those people I say, if these are the things we need to make our schools—and our students—successful, then we need to make this clear to Congress over the next year or two, because the No Child Left Behind Act is up for reauthorization. Congress has a responsibility to examine NCLB and determine whether the goal of 100 percent proficiency for all students by 2014 is realistic and something that we’re going to continue to enforce with sanctions, which are only going to grow heavier as we approach 2014. NCLB works through the concept of adequate yearly progress (AYP), and states and school districts have to meet this requirement in terms of their student outcomes and test scores at an escalating rate between now and 2014. As it stands, we’ve had enormous numbers of schools labeled as needing improvement, which the popular press has picked up as meaning schools that are failing. Well, they haven’t seen anything yet, because most states have backloaded their AYP requirements, and as we get closer to 2014, it’s going to become clear that it’s impossible to meet that goal, and the whole house of cards is going to collapse. And what that’s going to mean for education reform, for education funding, is devastating to consider.

So what’s the alternative? The alternative is that we either give up the law or take it seriously. If we take it seriously, we’ve got to start with looking at how to get highly qualified teachers. Is this going to come with a heavy price tag? Of course it will—but I come from a place where a \$5.6 billion increase a year is in the works, and so that is the range of expectations we’ve got to go with. Not money in the abstract, but money that’s used well.



Attracting—and Keeping—Truly Highly Qualified Teachers

The key element in getting truly highly qualified teachers is to change the requirements and regulations under No Child Left Behind and redefine what it means to be a highly qualified teacher—and we know that it is not related to minimum competency. From the first moment she or he enters the profession, a highly qualified teacher is taking basic responsibility for the education of a group of children. And at that entry stage, these teachers need to have a thorough knowledge of subject matter, a thorough knowledge of teaching skills, and a thorough knowledge of state standards, because it's their responsibility to teach students in relation to all three. These elements, in fact, are the essence of the definition proposed by the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC). For fifteen years, INTASC—created by the Council of Chief State School Officers—has been focusing on what the content of certification requirements and teacher testing should be. At this time, few states have picked up on these recommendations, but I say it's now time to take the INTASC approach and put it into federal law.

If this is to happen, we need to beef up our teacher preparation programs to produce people who are actually trained at the appropriate level when they enter the profession. In addition to this, we need to rework our teacher certification exams so that they're testing not for minimum competence but for true competence and ability to teach diverse students in the instructional levels required by state standards. And once we've got the means to produce highly qualified teachers, how do we attract them to the areas where we need them most? The answer lies in a very simple formula that teachers and teacher organizations will wholeheartedly agree with: more pay, more status, and more support. To create a successful, thriving learning environment, there needs to be a critical mass of competent teachers—not just a handful of master teachers per school—who are going to attract talented young people and keep them there. In addition to adequate salaries, it will probably be necessary to offer hiring bonuses to get these people into the hard-to-staff schools. These teachers will also need effective school leadership, assurance of adequate resources, high-quality induction and mentoring, as well as opportunities to collaborate and exercise their professional judgment.

Finally, if we can attract teachers at this level into these kinds of schools, how do we keep them there? While continuing to provide higher pay, higher status, and professional support is vital to the equation, there is another element that is equally important: thorough evaluation. Though typically the part of the equation least popular with professional teacher organizations, the system cannot work

properly without it. Rather than continuing to reward people who are not doing their job, we need to weed them out—and I even go so far as to suggest that we’ve got to rethink tenure. I believe in giving job security to teachers, but it needs to go hand in hand with the expectation that they are maintaining their effectiveness, no matter how long they’ve been at a school. If the bottom line of all this is successfully instructing all children at rigorous levels, we can’t have deadwood in there after fifteen or twenty years. We need to create fair evaluations to ensure that teachers are staying on their toes. We haven’t reached that stage yet with value-added assessment, but that needs to be the goal in order to serve as the bottom line of teacher effectiveness.

Turning Goals into Reality

Now, how realistic is this thought experiment? Are we ever going to get all these elements together and bring the concept of having truly qualified teachers to fruition? I think this goal is possible, though we’re probably not going to have perfection. The good news is that although the law calls for NCLB’s reauthorization to take place in 2007, Congress may decide not to make any major decisions before the 2008 presidential election. If this is the case, it will give us a little more time to think these things through and devise effective lobbying strategies to convince legislators that if they’re serious about implementing their educational standards, they’ve got to look hard at the kinds of questions we’re asking. Congress also needs to reconsider the ultimate mandate of NCLB, because 100 percent proficiency—even if we managed to get 100 percent highly qualified teachers—is not likely to occur by 2014. But can it occur by some later date? Is there some other way of expressing an ultimate goal that’s challenging and inspirational but also realistic? These are some of the questions we need to ask.

Along those lines and in that spirit, what practical steps can we take to meet the challenge to vastly improve the achievement of all students over the next few years? First of all, there’s no reason why we can’t change the definition of what we expect a highly qualified teacher to do. Right now, the phrase “highly qualified” is pure hyperbole; it’s a sound bite that misleads people on all sides. We’re telling parents of kids from the poor ghetto areas, from the poor rural areas, that we’re giving their children highly qualified teachers—and we’re not. That’s a situation that needs to change. Realistically, we need to start talking about phasing in new teachers. We’re not going to get highly qualified teachers overnight; as the law currently requires, we can’t even do it within a few years. But if the federal government adopted a demanding definition of “highly qualified” teachers, I think the states would respond; we’d get much higher-level tests and assessments and a much higher caliber of personnel.



Funding for the Future

Regarding salaries and related working conditions, we already have a number of economists and a number of education reformers who are focusing on this question. The Teaching Commission—put together by Lou Gerstner, former head of IBM, to look at this question—came out with a major report a couple of years ago. It said that to attract truly qualified people to the profession, you needed a 10 percent increase in salary across the board, and an approximately 30 percent increase for teachers going into hard-to-staff areas—the total bill being about \$30 billion. That seemed incredible to many people, but that’s the range of the increases that we’ve gotten through the costing-out studies done in New York City, Kansas, and a number of other places, so I don’t think it’s out of the question. Poll after poll shows that people throughout the country are willing to pay higher taxes for education if they’re convinced that the money is going to be used well and make a difference, which is why I think if we approach this issue as a whole package, we can get the necessary funding increases.

One other possible source of funding that would allow us to raise salary scales from the beginning—which is where they’re needed—is the pension system. Private industry in this country is currently going through a revolution in this area. The days of what are called defined benefit plans, where employees are guaranteed a certain amount of pension, may be coming to an end. Public employers are finding incredible difficulty keeping up with traditional defined benefit plans, and because they’ve underfunded these pensions in years past, many cities and states are now finding themselves required to pour billions of dollars into their pension systems. I think we need to take a look at the implications of the pension system in relation to teacher compensation, because rather than putting billions of dollars into pension plans that will pay off to people twenty-five or thirty years from when they enter the profession, some of that money could go into entering salary scales as well as hiring and other bonuses. When you’re trying to attract qualified young people, having them look twenty-five or more years down the road at their potential payoff does not serve as an enticement, and so the billions that are invested in that system are not the best use of funds in terms of recruiting qualified people. On the other end, people who have worked twenty-five or thirty years are entitled to a decent retirement, but our system is based on fifty-five or sixty being retirement age. These days, that’s not realistic, and most people who are retiring at those ages are double dipping or getting other jobs. I think it’s fair to say that people who’ve worked hard all their lives should get a decent pension, but if they’re not actually going to retire until they’re sixty-five or seventy and they’re just going to double dip, then we need to ask ourselves, is it sensible to be giving that kind of bonus at that age rather than earlier on throughout the salary scale, when it can serve the broader purpose?

The other kinds of questions we need to look at as far as retaining qualified people in the difficult-to-staff schools once we’ve gotten them in there concern things such as transfer provisions. Many existing contracts entitle high-seniority teachers who are laid off to fill vacancies or actually bump lower-seniority teachers who may be in some of these difficult-to-staff schools. In this scenario, you could find yourself with some really highly qualified teachers—whom you’ve worked hard to attract—being pushed out of their jobs by more senior and possibly less qualified teachers. One recent study estimated that approximately 40 percent of teachers in many inner-city schools are there against the will of the principal and the local teaching body. You can’t put together a cohesive staff if you can’t select your teachers—if you can’t have an assurance that people can work together. It’s not only a question of qualifications but a question of human interactions. What can we do about this problem? Through negotiations, that provision was changed in the New York City contract, and the teachers’ union accepted it. California recently adopted legislation that moves the whole state in this direction. We need to consider the rights of the senior teachers, but that can be done in a nuanced, more subtle way.

We have our work cut out for us and a lot of hard questions to answer, but attracting truly qualified educators to our underachieving schools is a very important first step. What’s really needed to attract and retain qualified teachers is a package that gives teachers the pay, the status, and the working conditions that they deserve and need, but that also has high expectations for them. Teacher effectiveness and commitment is the bottom line, and the extension of that bottom line is adequately preparing students—all students—to meet the challenging state standards.